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The Charles River Esplanade
Our Boston Treasure

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THE MEMORIAL TO THE VISIONARY LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT CHARLES ELIOT IS A SIMPLE GRANITE SHAFT LOCATED NEXT TO COMMUNITY BOATING. THE MEMORIAL TO HELEN AND JAMES STORROW (NOT PICTURED), A LARGE GRANITE DISK WITH A BRONZE PLAQUE IN THE CENTER, LIES IN THE PLAZA OF THE GLOUCESTER STREET OVERLOOK. ARTHUR SHURCLIFF DESIGNED BOTH MEMORIALS. AS FOR HIM, NOTHING YET EXISTS IN BRONZE OR GRANITE, BUT PLANS ARE UNDERWAY FOR A SHURCLIFF MEMORIAL COURTYARD IN THE NEW ESPLANADE PLAYGROUND.

The millions who watch Boston's Fourth of July concert at the Hatch Shell, in person or on television, take for granted the terra firma of its site, the Charles River Esplanade. It seems so permanent and natural. But that three-mile stretch of parkland between the Museum of Science and the Boston University Bridge is anything but natural, and it did not exist until the 20th century.

Like much of Boston, the Esplanade is made land. One hundred years ago, the Charles was still a tidal estuary, rising and falling nearly ten feet. The mudflats at low tide exposed revolting sights and smells: raw sewage, waste from factories, offal from slaughterhouses, even an occasional dead horse. The fashionable riverside homes on Beacon Street (on new-filled land) were separated from all this by a narrow road, sometimes flooded at high tide.

No one waved a wand to transform that unpleasant scene into the beautiful Esplanade of today. It evolved in stages, over several decades, at great cost and effort. Four private citizens stand out for their roles in its creation: landscape architect Charles Eliot; banker James Storrow; his widow, Helen Osborne Storrow; and Eliot's protégé, landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff.

Their stories are inspiring examples of what passion, vision, and energy can achieve.

CHARLES ELIOT: THE PROPHETIC VISION

A visionary who got things done, Charles Eliot (1859-1897) was a pioneer in the field of landscape architecture. He joined Frederick Law Olmsted's firm as an apprentice in 1883 shortly after graduating from Harvard College, where his father, Charles W. Eliot, was president. In 1893, after establishing himself independently, he returned to the Olmsted firm as a full partner. Only in his early thirties then, this lifelong nature lover, who considered green spaces "the cathedrals of the modern world," had already created two organizations with permanent legacies.

In 1890, Eliot formed the Trustees of Reservations, a private nonprofit organization, for the purpose of preserving the remaining green spaces around the state. It soon became an international model and inspired the British National Trust. The Trustees now own nearly 80 properties, including the Crane Reservation and World's End.

Of great significance for the future Esplanade was the work of Eliot and the Boston journalist Sylvester Baxter in creating the Metropolitan Park Commission (1893), a state agency that cut across the jurisdictions of individual cities and towns within an 11-mile radius of the State House to preserve and manage the finest natural scenery. The park commission became the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC)

in 1919, a multi-faceted agency that today embraces almost 20,000 acres, with ocean, river, and forest reservations, recreational facilities, and connecting parkways.

The heart of the new park system, Eliot believed, was the then-derelict Charles Basin, "destined to become the central 'court of honor' of the metropolitan district." Others before Eliot had proposed designs to beautify the shores of the Charles, notably Robert Gourlay, Uriel Crocker, and Charles Davenport, whose design resembles both the Alster Basin of Hamburg and today's Esplanade. In 1876 the newly formed Boston Park Commission, with advice from Olmsted, proposed a connected park system that included an embankment with walkways and trees, much like Davenport's plan.

Eliot not only "pictured" it; he put all of his energy and influence into making it a reality. During its first three years, the Metropolitan Park Commission acquired most of the land along the Charles River. Eliot lobbied hard for the creation of a water park similar to the Alster Basin, which he had greatly admired in Europe--a park with trees and lagoons, a park alive with boats and people.

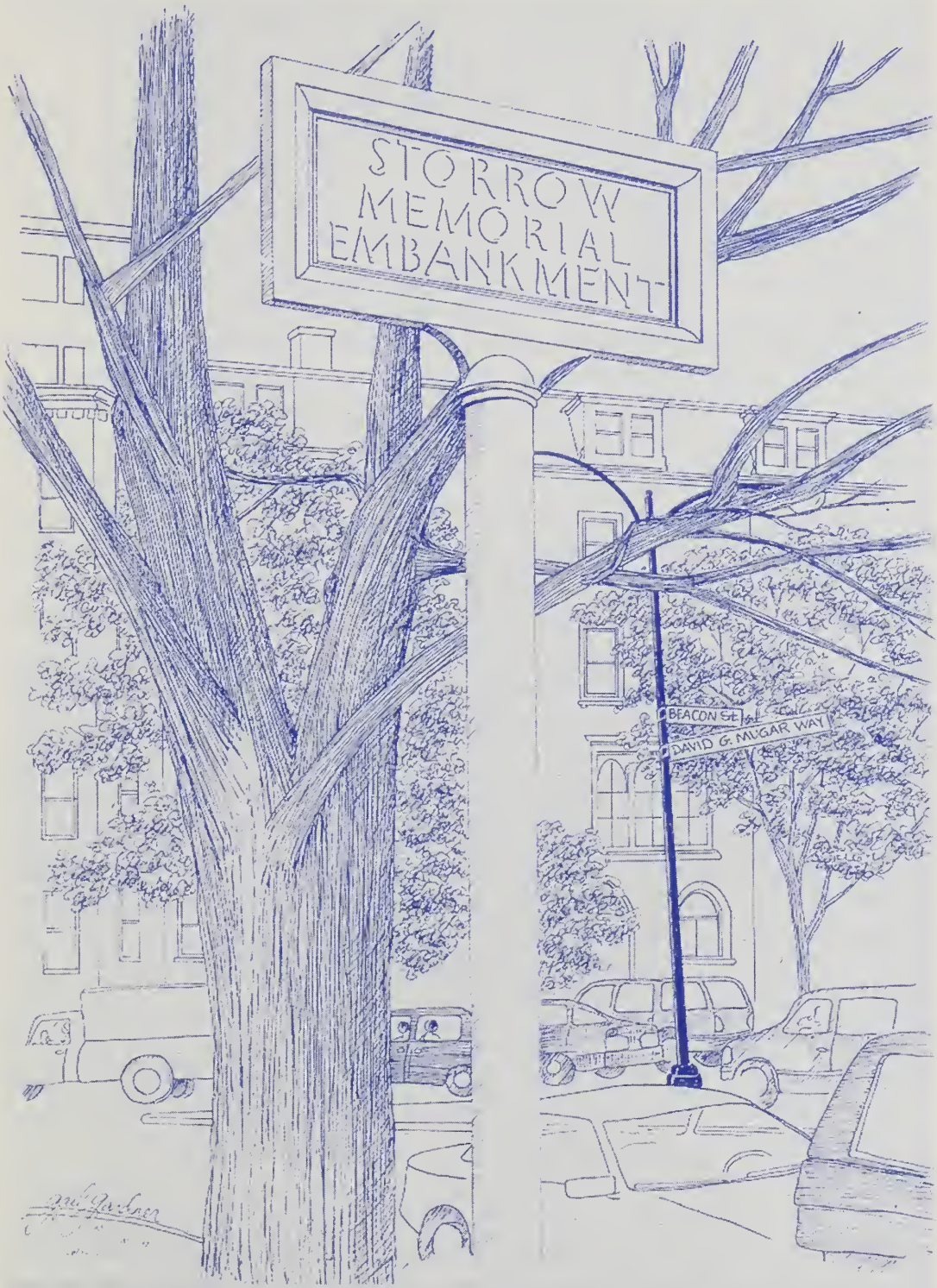
But, as Max Hall says in his book *The Charles*, "The principal key to the dreamed-of water park was a dam across the river to keep out the tides." And Eliot, with all his connections and hard work, could not overcome the implacable resistance to the dam. When he died of meningitis in 1897, at the young age of 37, Eliot left an enormous legacy. But his dream for the Charles River Basin was unfulfilled.

JAMES J. STORROW: FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The man most responsible for finally getting the dam built, banker James Jackson Storrow (1864-1926), came from the ranks of its most formidable opponents: the residents of Beacon Street, in particular the property owners on the water side. They were up in arms about a proposed plan to finance the dam by filling in a strip along the river and selling the land for new residences that would block their view--and lower their property values.

Opposition to the dam came from other quarters too. There was a sincere but mistaken belief that the "scouring" action of the river's tides kept the harbor from filling up, and a small group of people were opposed to the destruction of the marshes for environmental reasons. But the Beacon Street residents were the most adamant and powerful foes.

James Storrow, a blue-blooded Bostonian, had much to lose by going against his neighbors. But like Olmsted, Eliot, and others, he believed that beautiful open spaces and fresh air were essential for every-



THE ONE REMAINING BRONZE MARKER OF THE THREE PLACED IN 1939. IT STANDS NEAR THE CORNER OF BEACON STREET AND THE OLD EMBANKMENT ROAD, NOW DAVID MUGAR WAY.

one, both physically and spiritually. Storrow's dream, according to his biographer Henry Pearson, was "to create a broad basin for the joy and refreshment of the city's millions."

In 1901 Storrow spearheaded a new movement to get the dam constructed, organizing a massive letter-writing campaign that led to the support of many leading Bostonians. Among the supporters were Storrow's partner Henry Higginson (founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra), President Eliot of Harvard, and John ("Honey Fitz") Fitzgerald, who would later narrowly defeat his former ally Storrow in Boston's mayoral election of 1910.

When Storrow introduced a 1901 legislative bill to build the dam, the Beacon Street opponents scored a quick, tactical victory: the bill had not been given the preliminary advertising required for tidewater measures. Very cleverly, Storrow substituted a bill to create a commission to study the dam's feasibility, and that proposal, too reasonable to oppose, was enacted. To prepare an authoritative case for the commission's hearings, Storrow hired legal and engineering experts out of his own pocket.

The commission, headed by MIT president Henry Pritchett, began its hearings in 1902. Storrow showed photographs contrasting the deplorable conditions behind Beacon Street with the beauty of the Alster Basin of Hamburg and the Thames at Henley. He made an eloquent plea for playground space for the children in the crowded tenements of the North and West Ends.

In 1903 the Legislature approved the project and voted the money for it. And to the relief of the Beacon Streeters, the proposal for residential lots had been dropped. It was 1910 before the dam--at the present site of the Museum of Science--was completed, and the Charles became an almost tideless, freshwater basin. (In 1978 that dam was replaced by a new dam and pumping station, further downstream, that was better designed for flood control.)

With the construction of the dam came the "Boston Embankment," a new strip of land made from mud and gravel dredged up from the river bottom. About a hundred feet wide in most places, the fill was laid on top of huge marginal sewers designed to carry off the waste formerly dumped in the river.

The finished promenade of grass and concrete walkways was popularly called "the Esplanade," a French word for a flat promenade along a shore. And Esplanade it's been ever since, no matter what the official name.

But this promenade, albeit delightful, was not the water park Eliot and Storrow and others had dreamed of. Where were the people, especially the children? "Only an occasional figure braves the glitter and

heat of the sunlight on the unprotected esplanade," said one critic. Where were the boats? It turned out that the new Boston shore actually discouraged boating because the perpendicular seawall made the waves rougher than before. Except for college crews, few boats braved the basin.

Critics came from all ranks. In the summer of 1911 Mayor John Fitzgerald, just returned from a trip to Europe, told a press conference that "the comparison between the popular uses of the Charles River and the Alster Basin is really a shame to Boston." Fitzgerald and others, in the October 1911 issue of *New Boston*, proposed such solutions as shade trees, boathouses, band concerts, fireworks, and riverside cafes to attract more people to the Esplanade.

Lots of complaints and suggestions, but no action: this pattern continued for almost two decades and might never have ended without the generosity of Helen Storrow.

HELEN OSBORNE STORROW: A FITTING MEMORIAL

When James Storrow died in 1926, at the age of 62, he left a wife who had been devoted to him since they met on a mountain path in Switzerland in 1883. Helen Osborne Storrow (1864-1944) was born and reared in Auburn, New York, and like her husband, she came from a well-to-do, public-spirited family. In their married life, she and James devoted themselves to good causes, especially those that helped young people. Left a fortune by her husband and determined to make a fitting memorial to him, Helen let it be known that she was willing to donate $1,000,000 in his name to enlarge and beautify the Boston shores of the Charles River.

Inspired by Helen's proposed gift, a special legislative commission chaired by Henry Harriman recommended a comprehensive rebuilding to widen the Boston Embankment and add parks, playgrounds, and boating and bathing facilities. Final legislation, with $2.3 million in state money added to Helen's gift, was passed in May 1929. The City of Boston donated $400,000 to the project.

The money was there, but a daunting challenge remained: how to transform a longtime dream into reality.

ARTHUR SHURCLIFF: THE PERFECT DESIGN--TWICE

Landscape architect Arthur Asahel Shurcliff (1870-1957) came up with the perfect design for the Esplanade--not once, but twice.

Shurcliff (until 1930, Shurtleff) got his start under the tutelage of Charles Eliot. Eliot advised Shurcliff on what courses to take at Harvard College, where he planned to study landscape architecture and earn

another BS degree after graduating from MIT. Eliot mentored the young man, giving him landscape problems to solve on his own, and took him into the firm after he graduated from Harvard in 1896. Shurcliff remained in the Olmsted firm for nine years, leaving in 1905 to open his own office.

By 1929, when the Legislature voted the money to improve the Charles River Basin, Shurcliff was an eminent landscape architect about to be tapped for the site design of Colonial Williamsburg. For many years, he had been working with both the Boston Park Commission and the Metropolitan District Commission, and he was a member of the Harriman Commission. A lifelong resident of Beacon Hill, he knew the river well. It was an ideal fit of designer and project.

Shurcliff had long been thinking of ways to improve the basin. "Shade is a first requisite," he wrote in the November 1911 issue of *New Boston*. "Trees should be planted in abundance to cool the sun-baked promenades and to soften the reflected light from the water," and benches should be provided for loungers. Boating should be encouraged by easy and frequent access to the water, with floats, landings, and stairs. "The more Venetian the Basin activities, the better."

Working with MDC Commissioner Davis Keniston, Shurcliff came up with the plans to widen and beautify the Boston shore from the dam at Craigie Bridge (since 1951 the site of the Museum of Science) to the Cottage Farm (BU) Bridge. As with the earlier embankment, the fill for the new land was pumped up from the river's bottom by hydraulic dredges. After the fill--more than 40 acres--had settled, it was loamed, graded, and seeded.

During the first two years of construction, from 1931 to 1933, the site was an unholy mess. Outraged Bostonians used words like "desecration" and "monstrous blunder" to denounce the project. "Thousands of persons inquire daily, 'What is it all about?'" reported a front-page *Boston Globe* story of May 15, 1932, entitled "How Charles River Basin Will Look in Two Years." At that point, one could only imagine, in sketches, what the finished product would look like.

When it was all done the shore was transformed into a riverside park at least as beautiful as the much-admired Alster Basin of Hamburg.

The portion between the dam and Longfellow Bridge, known as the Charlesbank, had already been widened and improved in 1890 with an historic Olmsted-designed park, but it had fallen into disrepair. The new park included more filled land, recreational facilities, and landscaping.

The most dramatic changes were made on the rest of the shoreline, especially between the Longfellow and Harvard (Mass. Ave.)

THE LOTTA FOUNTAIN, A DRINKING BASIN FOR ANIMALS, FEATURES A DOG SCULPTURE BY KATHERINE LANE WEEMS. LOCATED NEAR BERKELEY STREET, IT WAS GIVEN IN 1939 BY THE ESTATE OF LOTTA CRABTREE, A POPULAR CHILD VAUDEVILLE STAR IN THE 19TH CENTURY. LOTTA DIED IN BOSTON IN 1924, LEAVING A $4 MILLION ESTATE TO SUCH CAUSES AS NEEDY VETERANS, RELEASED CONVICTS, AND ABANDONED PETS. THE FOUNTAIN, LIKE MANY HISTORIC STRUCTURES ON THE ESPLANADE, IS IN DIRE NEED OF RESTORATION.

Bridges, where a lagoon, overlooks, a boat haven with breakwaters, and enlarged Music Oval were added.

The centerpiece, the Storrow lagoon, is perhaps most easily identified as the large, formal lagoon where sunbathers now congregate. Located mostly between Exeter and Fairfield Streets, it measures about 240 feet wide and 1000 feet long. Narrow openings at each end, spanned by ornamental footbridges, permit water to circulate. The lagoon was designed for toy boat sailing, ice skating, and small pleasure craft. Model boat racing and skating proved so popular, in fact, that an elaborate Model Boat House and Recreation Building (now lost to Storrow Drive) was built in the late '30s.

Near the lagoon, at Dartmouth and Gloucester Streets, Shurcliff designed two overlooks with granite steps, walls, and balustrades. Trees were densely planted to give shade to the many benches. The Dartmouth Street overlook has lost most of its features except those in granite, but the one at Gloucester Street appears relatively unchanged except for the effects of time. The Norway maples, planted in formal, rectangular groves, have grown from the original saplings to stately heights.

Shurcliff's design also included a greatly enlarged lawn for the summer concerts initiated in 1929 by Arthur Fiedler, a 34-year-old violinist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The Music Oval, near the foot of Mt. Vernon Street, was extended a further 150 feet into the river and landscaped with linden trees and shrubs. In 1934, the original wooden concert shell--dismantled at the end of each season--was replaced by a new steel structure, also temporary, that proved insufferably hot. The Hatch Shell, a permanent granite structure, was built in 1940 with funds left by Maria Hatch in memory of her brother, Edward.

A boon to boating came from the two arc-shaped breakwaters, a granite boat landing similar to the overlooks, and a major change to the entire shoreline, what Shurcliff called "an interesting essential" of the design. New sloping shores, protected with riprap, replaced the old vertical, masonry seawall that had rebounded the waves and interfered with boating.

Pleasure craft could now safely navigate the river, and in 1941 Community Boating opened its doors. The first public sailing program in the country, the club was partly funded with some of Helen Storrow's gift. With it came a picturesque, much-photographed scene: dozens of sailboats tilting in the wind.

In the final stage of the project, beginning in the spring of 1934, Shurcliff directed the planting of trees and shrubs, choosing the kinds and positions. Twelve hundred trees were planted--linden, red oak, pin oak, Norway maple, sycamore maple, buttonwood, and willow. More

than 12,000 shrubs were arranged in attractive groups; the 24 varieties included forsythia, spirea, honeysuckle, lilac, privet, dogwood, and sumac.

In September 1936 the Storrow Memorial Embankment was formally dedicated. Three years later, three 10-foot-tall bronze markers were erected along the Esplanade to formally mark the change in name. But the new name never caught on--"Esplanade" was just too familiar and rolled off the tongue much more easily. Only one of the three markers, easily overlooked, remains today, on David Mugar Way (Embankment Road) near the Arthur Fiedler Bridge.

STORROW DRIVE: A BATTLE LOST AND WON

A mere fifteen years after the Esplanade's completion--and five years after Helen Storrow's death--the plan for a highway between the Longfellow and BU Bridges, defeated in 1929 at Helen's insistence, raised its inevitable head again. In an ironic twist, the name that never caught on for the parkland became attached to the roadway that threatened its very existence. Opponents fought fiercely, especially the Storrow Memorial Embankment Protective Association, led by Donald Starr. Mothers Against Storrow Drive, a group of women from Beacon Hill and the West End, marched, babes in arms, into the office of the bachelor governor, Paul Dever.

But the automobile was king, and a powerful group of highway contractors and their Beacon Hill allies prevailed. The Legislature approved the highway--by one vote. Even Shurcliff, who initially opposed the highway, became convinced it was necessary. Although they lost the war, the opponents still won a crucial victory: the Legislature voted money to replace what was lost to the highway.

Shurcliff, nearly 80 years old but still active, was again tapped as landscape architect. This time he worked with his son Sidney, who had joined the firm in 1930. Their charge was, in Shurcliff's words, "to more than replace the recreational features lost" to the new road. Most of the additions were made between the Longfellow and Harvard Bridges, the part of the Esplanade most heavily encroached upon by the highway.

The Shurcliffs devised a brilliant and simple solution to replace this lost parkland. They lengthened the outer barrier of the existing lagoon, creating a new, undulating island connected to the original shoreline by footbridges, making a series of lagoons that now extend to the Hatch Shell. On the western part of the Esplanade, between the Harvard and BU Bridges, a new undulating shoreline replaced the straight one. More trees, shrubs, and grass were planted everywhere.

In some ways the redesigned Esplanade is even more delightful

than the original. The long stretch of lagoons and the undulating shoreline gave it a natural, been-here-forever look. What has been lost, of course, is a green and intimate connection to the neighborhoods that border it.

THE ESPLANADE'S FUTURE: PRESERVING A TREASURE

The Esplanade today has changed little from that 1950s redesign, yet it remains a work in progress. New plantings, especially of cherry trees, make it more lush. A fountain commemorating the 100th anniversary of the metropolitan park system spouts merrily in the Dartmouth Street lagoon. Arthur Fiedler's memorial, a massive aluminum head, looks toward the Hatch Shell, completely refurbished in 1991.

The annual Fourth of July concert at the Hatch Shell got a new lease on life in 1974, when Fiedler and Boston businessman David Mugar came up with the idea of adding the 1812 Overture, cannons, church bells, and a dramatic fireworks display. This spectacular event, produced by Mugar and personally financed by him for 25 years, is now the most widely known image of the Esplanade.

But all has not changed for the better. Insufficient staffing and funding--and time--have taken their toll. The Esplanade still charms the eye, of course, but broken benches, rotten wood docks, unpruned trees, and other signs of neglect mar its beauty. The historic granite structures, especially the steps to the water, are in great disrepair and in danger of being lost. Unlike the empty, sunbaked promenade of yesteryear, today's parkland is immensely popular. This intense use brings its own problems.

Our treasured riverside park faces urgent needs, as does the entire basin from the Museum of Science to the Watertown Dam. Hope lies with the MDC's new Charles River Basin Master Plan, three years in the making. The renowned architectural firm of Goody, Clancy & Associates served as lead consultants on the plan, the first comprehensive study since 1928. A citizens' advisory committee, open to all, participated in dozens of meetings to recommend long-term improvements to restore and renew the basin. To make that vision a reality will take major commitments by both the public and private sectors.

The thousands of residents and visitors who enjoy the Esplanade each year owe a great debt to Charles Eliot and the metropolitan commission he created, to James and Helen Storrow, and to Arthur Shurcliff. It is now in our hands to preserve and enhance their great legacy for future generations to enjoy.

This article was researched with the assistance of MDC staff members Maria Beiter and Russ Geer, rangers for the Charles River Basin; historian Karl Haglund, project manager for the New Charles River Basin; and Sean Fisher, archivist.

Linda Cox is a founder of the Esplanade Association, a nonprofit organization that works to preserve, restore, and enhance the historic Charles River Esplanade as a vital urban park to be enjoyed by all. The organization evolved from a joint committee, founded in 1997, of the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay and the Beacon Hill Civic Association.

For more information about the Esplanade Association and how to make a tax-deductible contribution, please call (617) 824-4273.

Published by the
Metropolitan District Commission
in conjunction with
The Esplanade Association